



## CHAPTER SEVEN PUBLIC COMMENT

### INTRODUCTION

This feasibility study concerns an area of almost 2,297 square miles that stretches from Vancouver, Washington in the South to Sumas, Washington in the North. Nine state counties lie in this alignment, as well as numerous cities, towns and villages. Millions of people live within the scope of the study, and numerous more work or recreate within its bounds.

Because of the great number of people who would be affected by any proposed Washington Commerce Corridor, it was deemed necessary to include a public involvement element in this feasibility study. The public involvement process included two parts:

1. Ongoing public comment received, logged, and answered by WSDOT and the consultant team;
2. Three public comment sessions held as joint information sharing/public response sessions

Public response was significant for both parts of the feedback process. WSDOT and the consultant team received hundreds of phone calls and emails documenting personal reaction to the project. Though every comment was unique, it is possible to group them into major themes. This chapter summarizes the responses, notes how WSDOT and the consultant team responded to the comments, and introduces the major themes brought up by public comment.

### ONGOING PUBLIC COMMENT

As of the time of writing this report, roughly 200 comments had been received, answered and recorded by WSDOT and the consultant team. These comments can be grouped into three “umbrella” categories:

1. Information gathering or general query
2. Negative feedback regarding the WCC
3. Positive feedback regarding the WCC

A summary of the major themes for each category are detailed below.

#### Information Gathering Contacts

##### Logistical Questions/Comments

Roughly 10% of all phone and email contacts were from people interested in finding out more about the WCC. These comments came at all stages of the project, beginning in early March and lasting through mid December. Some of these comments were logistical in nature, inquiring about the status of the project or the nature of the public meeting. For example:

**3/17/04:** Citizen made contact with consultant team requesting that a representative from the consultant team attend a citizen meeting in Deming on April 21.

**Response:** Consultant agreed and attended meeting.

**7/16/04:** Citizen contacted consultant team requesting that additional meetings be held.

**Response:** Consultant explained reasoning behind only holding a few meetings but agreed to mention comment to WSDOT and the rest of the Steering Committee.

### **Requests/Clarifications of Materials**

Other comments falling into this category included clarifications of material or request for additional materials. For example:

**7/29/04:** Citizen contacted consultant looking for a more detailed alignment map.

**Response:** Consultant explained that there is no more detailed map since this is a feasibility study and not a proposed project. It is deliberately vague since many options are being evaluated.

**8/5/04:** Citizen contacted consultant requesting more information about the planned displacement assessment/compensation plan for those people living very close to the SR 9 corridor under risk of being moved.

**Response:** Consultant explained that it is far too early to have formulated a plan of action for this, since we are in the feasibility stages of the WCC and it may not ever become a project. In addition, the alignment could shift so that it is no longer along SR 9.

### **Negative Comments Received Regarding the WCC**

Almost 85% of comments received were negative in nature, urging WSDOT to not proceed with the WCC concept. However, most of these comments do not address the efficacy of the corridor or its uses, but instead are focused on the opposition of citizens to any such project running through their communities. In addition, the majority of the comments came from the communities in the Northern part of the state surrounding SR 9. The major themes of the comments are listed and described below:

- Environmental destruction;
- Increased sprawl/development;
- Increased traffic and no congestion relief;
- Expensive public investment;
- Perceived lack of public participation process;
- Perceived lack of proper environmental review process;
- Possible relocation of people and communities or other interruption of community life; and
- Loss of personal property through eminent domain.

The groupings that comments tended to fall into are detailed further below. Please note that many comments included more than one of the above topics.



## Environmental Destruction/Harm

Many of the public comments focused on the environmental degradation that would be caused by the WCC project. Many spoke to the pristine farmland and beautiful natural areas that would be permanently altered if a project like this were to succeed. Others mentioned impacts to wildlife, in particular migratory animals and freshwater salmon. Even more people thought of the environmental degradation that would come from increased traffic and car travel, and subsequent air and noise pollution concerns. Some comments and the response from the consultant team are listed below.

**7/13/04:** Citizen explains that people chose to live in this area because of the natural beauty and interesting ecosystems. Urges that the WCC does not destroy this.

**Response:** WSDOT explains that this is a feasibility study and not a project, that it is examining many different alignments and transportation modes. Also invites citizen to look at website and invites to next public meeting.

**7/15/04:** Concerned citizen writes that the project will destroy natural beauty along the Nooksack river, as well as destroy many small farms and communities.

**Response:** WSDOT explains that this is a feasibility study and not a project, that it is examining many different alignments and transportation modes. Also invites citizen to look at website and invites to next public meeting.

**8/8/04:** Citizen writes that the Pacific Northwest is known for its amazing natural resources, and that to propose a plan that could alter and disrupt these resources is unacceptable.

**Response:** WSDOT explains that this is a feasibility study and not a project, that it is examining many different alignments and transportation modes. Also invites citizen to look at website and invites to next public meeting.

**9/2/04:** Citizen questions why a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not being performed for this project. Questions whether WSDOT is fulfilling its legal requirements.

**Response:** WSDOT explains that an EIS would be required if the WCC were to become an actual project. An EIS is a very detailed and expensive process, and is only beneficial to projects with a refined scope and very set alignment. The WCC has neither.

## Community Harm and Social Dislocation

Many of the comments focused on how the WCC would impact/destroy small communities in the Cascade foothills. These comments were almost exclusively from the rural communities of Northern Washington State such as Deming, Sedro-Woolley, Acme, Bellingham and Whatcom County. Some of the comments are described in detail below:

**7/10/04:** Citizen writes to WSDOT that “a project like this would devastate the small communities in its path, and this idyllic environment, and its peace and quiet, would forever be lost.”

**Response:** WSDOT explained that this is still in the feasibility phase, so all comments are welcomed. Pointed out public meetings and website for further information.

**7/11/04:** Two citizens send letter to WSDOT and Consultant detailing their concern at the effects of this project on the “social capital” of rural northern Washington State. They urge the team to consider the effects brought on by noise, pollution, loss of family homes, dislocation, community fragmentation, and a loss of a valuable way of life.

**7/14/04:** WSDOT receives comment of “Let’s leave the rural that we have left, alone.”

**Response:** WSDOT explained that this is still in the feasibility phase, so all comments are welcomed. Pointed our public meetings and website for further information.

### **Wasted Public Funds/ Transportation Dollars**

Comments relating to the monetary expenditure on the WCC were again mostly focused on the Highway portion. Though many people supported the efforts of WSDOT to look towards future infrastructure needs, many disliked the inclusion of a highway in the study. The following points were repeatedly made throughout the duration of the study:

- Building more highways only seems to generate more traffic and more congestion and doesn’t solve mobility needs;
- Transportation money is very limited and should be used to solve more pressing needs like 520 and the Alaskan Way Viaduct; and
- Intermodal solutions such as rail should be topmost priority of WSDOT and the state legislature.

**7/12/04:** Citizen writes that the project is a waste of time and money, and that Washington State should focus on increasing rail service and other forms of public transportation.

**Response:** WSDOT reminded citizen that this is a preliminary feasibility study covering many modes. Also gave website link for more information and invited to next citizen meeting.

**7/14/04:** Citizen writes that this is the third or fourth time that I-605 has been studied. It is time to stop wasting money on this “no-go” project.

**Response:** WSDOT reminds citizen that this is not the I-605, it is a different study examining many modes. Gave link to WCC website and invited to next citizen meeting.

**7/16/04:** Citizen writes that “I am certainly disappointed that public funds have been allocated to “study” this massive new road development. In this time of strapped budgets, .....it is particularly inappropriate to spend money on a dream that can so easily be linked to so many negative consequences.”

### **Unwanted Growth, Sprawl, and GMA Violation**

Some people voiced concern that the WCC project would violate Washington State’s efforts to control, manage, and plan growth. The location of much of the project outside of the Urban Growth Boundary was not well received by many people. In addition, the freeway component of the WCC was repeatedly dismissed as contrary to progressive planning principles.

**7/12/04:** Citizen writes that there should be no new freeways and no new WCC. He states that “it would violate all efforts and land use planning and the GMA”.



**Response:** WSDOT reminded citizen that this is a preliminary feasibility study covering many modes. Also gave website link for more information and invited to next citizen meeting.

**7/12/04:** Citizen writes that a highway would just increase sprawl and “California type growth” in Washington State.

**Response:** WSDOT reminded citizen that this is a preliminary feasibility study covering many modes. Also gave website link for more information and invited to next citizen meeting.

### Public Participation Process Concerns

Some people voiced concern over the perceived lack of a public participation process or the lack of public involvement into the WCC Feasibility study process. For example:

**7/15/04:** Consultant team received email stating that citizen is “very disappointed” with the public participation process. He only saw 1 day notice for the meeting of 7/16/04, and it appears to be the only one.

**Response:** Consultant replies that there are three scheduled public participation programs, and agrees to put citizen on mailing list for the next one. Also reminds citizen that feedback is accepted, at any time, from WSDOT or the consultant team.

**7/16/04:** Citizen contacts WSDOT curious as to why there are no additional meetings planned and if it is possible to request one.

**Response:** WSDOT replies that three meetings at different localities were agreed upon by the state legislature and should be acceptable for a feasibility study. Also reminds citizen that feedback is accepted, at any time, from WSDOT or the consultant team.

### Positive Comments Received Regarding the WCC

Roughly 5% of the comments received by WSDOT or the consultant team were positive and eager to see the WCC become a project. For the most part, this support came from people frustrated with mobility in the region, who see the WCC as an attempt to alleviate congestion and increase mobility. For example:

**7/13/04:** WSDOT received phone call from citizen saying that the WCC is “the greatest thing that he’s ever heard of.” He names off all of the states that use toll roads and wonders why Washington has none.

**7/15/04:** WSDOT receives support email from citizen saying that he “wholeheartedly” supports the project, as there is a need for N-S capacity. He also states that the Portland to Seattle traffic is miserable, and this would help to alleviate it.



## PUBLIC MEETING COMPONENT

In addition to the ongoing public comments, the public was also given the opportunity to speak at three different public meetings throughout the project:

1. July 16<sup>th</sup> Bellevue, WA
2. November 10<sup>th</sup> Bellingham, WA
3. November 23<sup>rd</sup> Chehalis, WA

All three meetings had the same format: a presentation to show progress/results from the consultant team or WSDOT followed by a public comment period. Very little time was given to respond to public comment, so as to increase the time available for public comment. A summary of comments from each of the three meetings is listed below.

### **July 16<sup>th</sup> Bellevue Meeting** **Ramada Inn, Bellevue** **9:30am-12:30pm**

This advisory forum and public comment period was held in order to keep stakeholders informed of study purpose and progress. The theme of the forum was to remind the public of the conceptual nature of the study and the extended study timeframe of 20-50 years. The forum began with consultant presentations and a Northwest Regional Panel discussion. It then moved into a public comment period. In total, 32 citizens registered to testify, most of them from the Northern Washington Communities of Whatcom and Skagit County. Comments were limited to three minutes to allow everyone to speak.

### **Public Comments Summarized**

For the most part, comments given at this forum were not supportive of the WCC idea. In addition, concerns roughly echoed those received in the ongoing public comment period summarized above. Voiced concerns included the following:

- **The financial feasibility of this project and if it would become a taxpayer burden**
  - Toll roads historically do not work
  - Several other projects similar to this have been built and have underperformed
  - State bond rating would suffer
- **The environmental degradation caused by construction and operation of the WCC**
  - Loss of habitat for endangered species including salmon species
  - Loss of pristine wilderness areas and natural beauty
  - Effect of WCC on clean drinking water
  - Effect of paving over beautiful land and delicate ecosystems
  - Watershed impacts
    - Cedar River Watershed
    - South Fork of the Nooksack River
    - Sammish River



- Creation of a barrier to migration for some species
  - Would destroy vital recreational land for city dwellers- a rare remaining natural place.
- **The WCC does not seem to be in line with Washington State's GMA and other land use/planning efforts**
  - Much of it is outside of the Urban Growth Area
  - Would accelerate sprawl and fragmented urban growth
- **The impact of the WCC on property owners**
  - What would be the process for repayment of displaced property owners?
  - Can Eminent domain be used since this would be a privately financed project?
  - Public needs to be kept current on WCC planning since it affects the long-range plans of multiple agencies, school districts, cities, towns, etc.
- **Drain of transportation money and time**
  - Detracts time and money away from real problems like the 520 bridge and Alaskan Way Viaduct replacement
  - Not good time for such feasibility studies considering the federal and state transportation funding crisis
- **Public process shortcomings**
  - Not enough meetings
  - Not held right at the beginning of the process
  - Not reaching out to all stakeholders, just a few
  - Distrust that comments are being considered/heard
  - Why does there appear to be a disconnect between the study and local planning goals?
- **Freeways as an outdated transportation solution**
  - Need to look to sustainable multimodal solutions like rail
  - It has been repeatedly proven that more freeways just bring more traffic and more congestions
  - Do not want Washington State to turn into California
  - Why build more considering the impending oil shortage/crisis?
- **Destruction of communities and rural lifestyle**
  - People live in this area in order to preserve a rare rural lifestyle. This would destroy it.
  - Would fragment communities that have stood for a long time
  - Would cause social isolation, loss of community, depression, etc.
  - Citizens will proudly say "Not in My Backyard" because their backyard happens to be a unique and gorgeous area.
  - Want their children to be able to live the same rural lifestyle as they are enjoying
  - Not every community needs to look like Bellevue or Seattle. This project would accelerate this process



Several supportive comments were also aired, including the following:

- Recognition that this study is attempting to address mobility needs in the future and should be given the opportunity to do so. Without mobility and freight movement this area will suffer.
- Recognition of the multi-modal component of the WCC, and how it includes rail, utilities, etc.

**November 10<sup>th</sup> Bellingham Meeting**  
**Bellingham County Courthouse**  
**6:00 – 8:00pm**

This advisory forum and public comment period was held in order to update the public on the initial findings of the feasibility study. The meeting began with WSDOT presenting the major finding, that the WCC as conceived is not feasible. The meeting then went into a public comment period. 29 people registered to give a testimony. Concerns and comments are summarized below.

**Public Comments Summarized**

- **Concern over highway component of the project**
  - Need to consider more multimodal and sustainable solutions.
  - Highways are outdated and do not solve congestion problems.
  - Focus should switch to land use changes, not building roads to connect communities that are far apart.
- **Concern over the study recommendations**
  - Environmental process should not be streamlined.
  - TM's seem to lay out a framework to "push through" projects like the WCC.
  - Public/Private partnerships are inherently tricky and can compromise the best interest of the public. They should only be entered into with utmost caution.
- **Concern over "costs" as calculated in the study**
  - True definition of "cost" needs to be broadened to include social costs and costs of loss of rural lifestyle.
  - Costs should also include wetland/ecosystem mitigation costs, which are significant.
  - Rail cost estimates appear to be inflated. Other people have calculated different costs.
  - The WCC costs do not include rest areas, insurance, tunnel ventilation, or other very expensive components.
  - Costs for building the WCC could be twice as high as estimated in the study, making the debt payments unsustainable.
- **Concern over shortcomings of study and preconceived beliefs of the consultant team**





- WSA entered study believing that growth is good and altered the TM's to reflect this belief.
- WSA does not seem to recognize the value of rural lifestyles/communities
- The TM's are full of environmental oversights and miscalculations.
- TM's do not mention:
  - Nooksack tribe
  - Many rivers
  - Endangered Species Act
  - Salmon
  - Wetlands reclamations efforts
- **Concern over public process**
  - Distrust that public was not included earlier
  - Not happy with the language used to address community. Phrases such as "potential community impacts" are actually "real community issues".
  - Distrust that this project is actually "dead". Many feel that they need to remain vigilant.
  - Request for improved, non-hierarchical communication process.

**November 23<sup>rd</sup> Chehalis Meeting**  
**Lewis County Courthouse**  
**6:00 – 8:00pm**

This advisory forum and public comment period was held in order to update the public on the initial findings of the feasibility study. The meeting began with WSDOT presenting the major finding, that the WCC as conceived is not feasible. The meeting then went into a public comment period. 11 people registered to give a testimony. Concerns and comments are summarized below.

**Public Comments Summarized**

- **Concerns over the proposal for further study of a Chehalis to I-90 tolled truck facility**
  - Cost per mile toll estimate is far too high and would put strain on an already strained business.
  - Trucking can no longer be the "cash cow" of the state. It is already an industry in crisis.
  - Urge more in-depth cost analysis before any tolled truck facility is considered.
  - Questions over if truckers will still have to pay tax on fuel since gas tax already goes to building roads. If they are already paying a toll then they shouldn't have to pay gas taxes as well.
  - Tolling would inflate the cost of living and costs of business. It would also seriously hurt the abilities of truckers to make a living and provide for their families.
  - Must make sure that our suggestions facilitate growth, rather than hinder it.
- **Concern over the freeway component of the WCC**



- Freeways are an outdated solution. Rail and other multimodal solutions need to be examined instead.
  - The WCC would have serious environmental implications in the northern part of WA State.
  - Highways do not work to alleviate congestion.
- **Concern over the study findings**
  - Environmental process should not be streamlined, it is already barely sufficient to protect critical wildlife and ecosystems.
  - Concern that the cost for the rail portion was overestimated. Real costs would be far more feasible. Urges WSDT and legislature to not forget about rail.
  - Private/ Public partnerships may not look out for the best needs of the people. They should be entered into very carefully, and must make sure to include robust public interaction.